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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to determine how readers regard the accountability of newspapers that employ ombudsmen. Subjects were 393 readers of Kentucky's "Louisville Times" and "Courier Journal." Both papers, the first American papers to hire ombudsmen, publicize the existence of the ombudsman in a daily column, and from 1974 to 1981, the "Times" employed a news critic whose responsibilities included writing a regular column that evaluated the work of area news media, including those owned by his publisher. Three sets of questions were administered to subjects by telephone. The first dealt with awareness of the ombudsman program at the papers, the second dealt with readership of the news criticism column, and the third dealt with perceptions of accountability. Results indicated that slightly more than half the sample were unaware of the program, while slightly more than one-fifth of the sample were most aware of it. More than 45% of the "Times" readers said they read the news criticism column at least once a month, although nearly two thirds of them could name neither the column nor the writer. Furthermore, the 45% who said they read the column did not connect the column with attempts by the newspaper to be accountable. Awareness of the ombudsman program had a positive influence on perceived newspaper accountability. The results suggest than an ombudsman may work well as a public relations device with readers. (HTH)

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THE PUBLIC'S VIEW OF NEWSPAPER ACCOUNTABILITY

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INTRODUCTION

The short history of the newspaper ombudsman is a controversial one. The ombudsman concept certainly has its critics: "window dressing" is what one editor once called an ombudsman program following its demise at his paper.[1] Ombudsman advocates say this editor's attitude represents the arrogance with which many editors view their readers. And public perception of arrogance, the advocates say, is what accountability programs such as ombudsmen are meant to offset. The ombudsman has resulted primarily from an increase in this perception and a general low regard for newspapers.

How, then, does the public regard a newspaper that has an ombudsman? The purpose of this study was to find answers to this question by administering a survey in a market where the daily newspapers employ an ombudsman. The papers, the Louisville Courier-Journal and The Louisville Times, also underwent scrutiny by a news critic up to the time data were collected. This allowed analysis of the effect of another form of newspaper accountability.

BACKGROUND

The idea of newspaper accountability emerged a full 20 years before the first newspaper ombudsman. In 1947, Time publisher Henry Luce underwrote the Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press, which was composed primarily of social scientists and university professors. Among the many concerns of the commission was the lack of self-regulation in the press. "Everyone concerned . . . should put forth the effort to make the press accountable," the commission wrote. "If it does not become so of its own motion, the power of the government will be used, as a last resort, to do so."[2]

The call for accountability and responsiveness to media consumers was repeated throughout the commission report. "By kind of an unwritten law," the panel said, "the press ignores the errors and misrepresentations, the lies and scandals of which its members are guilty."[3] Failure to correct its ways, the commission maintained, would jeopardize a free press. It suggested that members of the press discipline each other through published criticism.

Actually, public criticism of the press existed at the time of the commission report. For example, a column in The New Yorker called the "Wayward Press" appeared under Robert Benchley's byline beginning in 1927 and later under the byline of A.J. Liebling. But the newspaper-reading public was not

exposed to regular evaluations of the media and the suggestions of the Hutchins Commission were largely ignored.

Finally, in 1967, an article by A.H. Raskin in The New York Times Magazine suggested that newspapers establish a "Department of Internal Criticism" designed to examine the standards of the individual newspaper and to act as a public protector.[4] Among those who took Raskin to heart was Norman Isaacs, then the executive editor of the Louisville daily newspapers. As conceived by Isaacs in June 1967, the ombudsman was to respond to reader complaints and prepare internal memoranda concerning the complaints. Shortly thereafter the Courier-Journal and the Louisville Times became the first American newspapers to hire an ombudsman.

Today more than 33 ombudsmen work for 40 North American newspapers in various capacities. Many--like the ombudsman at The Washington Post--write columns publicly discussing readers' complaints and other problems with the newspaper. A few, the ombudsman at the Louisville newspapers among them, do not go public, instead responding to readers through phone calls and letters and communicating with reporters and editors through memos and personal contact. The Louisville newspapers do publicize the existence of the ombudsman in a standing column that appears daily in both papers in the "A" section. And from 1974 to 1981, the Louisville Times employed a news critic whose responsibilities included writing a regular column, which evaluated the work of area news media, including those owned by his publisher.

Given this backdrop, the present study was undertaken to determine the effectiveness of ombudsmen and other accountability systems, such as news criticism columns. Is being openly and actively responsive to readers likely to improve the newspaper's image in the eyes of the public?

LITERATURE REVIEW

To date, only a handful of articles have been written concerning ombudsman programs specifically or other methods of accountability in general. And none of this research deals with whether these programs make the public believe newspapers are more credible or accountable. In fact, few of the available articles deal with evaluations of the programs, instead concentrating on the number that exist.

For example, Barnett surveyed daily newspapers in the United States to find out how many had a system of accountability. Eight of the 134 newspapers that responded to his questionnaire indicated they had "genuine" ombudsmen, that is, employees who took reader complaints and responded to them.[5] Two years later a survey of accountability methods revealed more newspapers implementing a variety of accountability systems; 12 of the 135 newspapers questioned had ombudsmen.[6]

The next survey of ombudsman programs showed no substantial increase in their number, but it did show that where ombudsman programs existed, the ombudsmen believed they had strengthened and expanded their roles.[7]

Another study took a different tack from the previous research. It looked at an ombudsman program at an individual newspaper and evaluated how members of the news staff perceived the ombudsman. Nelsen and Starck's results suggest the possibility for internal success for an ombudsman program at a paper where one does not exist. They also suggested the possibility for initial resentment by staff members, followed by eventual support once the program was proven effective. The researchers also suggested research be done to determine public reaction and acceptance of ombudsmen.[8]

Recent research by Bollinger studied ombudsmen from both aspects. That is, it surveyed ombudsmen to determine their number and the nature of their work and it included interviews with reporters and editors at a paper with an ombudsman. In terms of the latter, Bollinger tried to find out staff opinions about the effects of the ombudsman on the quality of the newspaper rather than their personal opinions toward the ombudsman. Their opinions were neutral over whether the ombudsman improved the quality of the paper. Bollinger, like Nelsen and Starck, also believed a study assessing public reaction to ombudsmen was the next step.[9]

The essence of the present study is an attempt to make that assessment. The Louisville newspapers were chosen for this study because they were the first newspapers in the country to employ an ombudsman and they publicized the existence of an ombudsman in a standing column every day. The existence of a news criticism column at The Louisville Times when the study was undertaken also provided the opportunity to judge public reaction

undertaken also provided the opportunity to judge public reaction to that form of accountability.

The study tested two major hypotheses:

H1: The greater the awareness of the ombudsman program, the greater the perception of accountability.

H2: The greater the frequency of readership of of the news criticism column, the greater the perception of accountability.

In this study, public participation in the accountability program is either awareness of the ombudsman or news criticism column readership. Accountability is a state in which an organization or individual takes responsibility for its own actions by either criticizing itself openly or opening channels through which others can give criticism.

The hypotheses were developed to determine the relationship between public participation in the accountability program and the public's perception of whether the Louisville newspapers were, in fact, being accountable. The relationships suggested in the hypotheses are based on the assumptions that people who read news criticism or who are aware of the ombudsman would have some perception of accountability by the Louisville newspapers.

METHOD

Questionnaires were administered by telephone to 393 residents of Louisville, Ky., in March 1981. Members of a political science honorary at the University of Louisville, all with previous telephone interviewing experience and training, administered the questionnaires. Telephone numbers were drawn from the metropolitan Louisville telephone directory through a systematic random sample technique.[10]

Three sets of questions were crucial for testing of the hypotheses. The first set dealt with awareness of the ombudsman program at the Louisville newspapers. All respondents were aksed whether they were aware of the program; those who said they were aware were asked to describe the program. Descriptions such as "complaining to the paper" and "handling corrections" were coded as "can describe"; respondents in this category were considered more aware of the ombudsman than those who could not describe the program or who described it incorrectly. Respondents who said they were unaware of the program were considered the least aware.

The next set of questions crucial for hypothesis-testing dealt with readership of the news criticism column. Only those respondents who said they read The Louisville Times were asked the question dealing with frequency of reading the column. Although the column ran once a month in the Sunday Courier-Journal, it originated and ran more frequently in the Times. In an attempt to verify respondents' claims to have read the column, interviewers asked two multiple-choice questions about

the column, one dealing with the name of the column, the other with the name of the columnist. Based on this information, four categories were established for the determination of news criticism column readership: those who said they never read the column or read it only once a month; those who said they read the column once or twice a week but who could not name the column or the columnist; those who said they read the column once or twice a week and who could name either the column or the columnist; and those who read the column once or twice a week and could name both the column and the columnist.

A third set of questions made up the dependent measure in the study, accountability. Because an exhaustive search of the literature failed to turn up a measurement for accountability, an attempt was made to develop a summative, Likert-type scale to measure the concept.

The first step in developing the scale was assembling an item pool, each item to eventually be judged by a respondent over a five-point, "strongly agree-to-strongly disagree" continuum. Items were assembled from a focus-group session with 10 people, all describing themselves as regular readers of a daily metropolitan newspaper.[11]

Fifty-six attitudinal items were assembled from the trasnscripts of the tape-recorded session to form an item pool. The item pool was administered to students in a beginning news-writing class, who were asked to respond over a five-point scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree) to the statements extracted from the focus group.

The data were then factor analyzed with a principal factors solution with varimax rotation; one factor was revealed, a nine-item factor identified as the "fairness" dimension. The nine items were subjected to separate item-to-total corrected correlation reliability analysis (factor scores and the alpha reliability estimate are reported in Table 1). Possible scores on the nine-item scale ranged from nine to 45, the high score indicating maximum perceived accountability.

Data analysis. The major statistical tool used to make comparisons among three levels of ombudsman awareness and four levels of column readership was analysis of variance. Scheffe' post-hoc comparison tests were conducted to isolate the source of significant variations when they were found.

Results

Awareness of Ombudsman. All respondents were asked about their awareness of the ombudsman program at the Louisville newspapers, regardless of newspaper readership or column readership. In an attempt to verify respondents' answers, interviewers asked those who said they were aware of the program for a description of the program. Using the determinants described in the methods section of this paper, results showed more than half (55.7%) the sample unaware of the program, while slightly more than one-fifth (22.9%) of the sample were most aware of the ombudsman (see Table 2).

Column Readership. Only readers of The Louisville Times

answered the questions dealing with readership of the news criticism column. More than 45 percent of the respondents said they read the news criticism column at least once a month, 12 percent said they never read the column, and more than 40 percent did not respond, representing those who said they never read the afternoon paper (see Table 3). Nearly two-thirds of those who claimed to read the column could name neither the column nor the writer (see Table 4).

Accountability Scores. Possible scores on the nine-item "fairness" factor used to measure accountability ranged from nine to 45, the higher score indicating maximum perceived accountability. The actual range of scores for the 393 respondents was 10 to 42; normal distribution in the accountability scores was observed.

Tests of the hypotheses. The two hypotheses being tested in this paper dealt with the effects of the two components of the Louisville newspapers' accountability program. Specifically, tests were performed to see if greater participation in the accountability program resulted in higher scores on the accountability scale.

Analysis of variance showed no significant differences among four news criticism column readership groups (see Table 5). This apparent lack of difference in perceived accountability among those four groups indicates that readership of the news criticism column had little influence over whether individuals believe the newspapers are accountable.

Significant differences among the three levels of awareness

of the ombudsman program did exist (see Table 6). Those who said they were aware of the program and could describe it scored higher on the accountability scale than those in the other two groups--"aware, cannot describe" and "not aware." Scheffe' post-hoc comparisons found that these differences were significant at the .001 level, but the difference between the "aware, cannot describe" group and the "not aware" group was not significant. This indicates that awareness of the ombudsman program does influence perceived accountability of the newspapers, as long as the awareness is accompanied by correct knowledge of what the ombudsman does.

Further analysis of the data with Pearson's product-moment correlation showed a significant relationship between ombudsman awareness and the nine-item fairness factor that represented the accountability scale. It also showed significant relationships between ombudsman awareness and readership of both Louisville dailies (r=.26 and .24 for the Courier-Journal and Times respectively) and perceived accountability and readership of both dailies (r=.15 and .14; see Table 7). This suggested the possibility that the relationship between readership and perceived accountability is enhanced by the awareness of the ombudsman. The scenario of newspaper readership leading to awareness of the ombudsman, which in turn leads to the perception of accountability, is borne out when partial correlation is used to examine the intervention effect of ombudsman awareness. When that variable is controlled, the relationship between newspaper readership and perceived

accountability is reduced to an insignificant level (r=.10 for The Louisville Times; r=.09 for the Courier-Journal. In both cases $p > .05$). This would indicate that newspaper readership alone is not enough to result in perceived accountability; it must be accompanied by an awareness that the newspapers have an ombudsman.

DISCUSSION

The positive relationship between readership of the two Louisville dailies and both ombudsman awareness and perceived accountability was to be expected, particularly when one considers the amount of promotional activity the newspapers have given the ombudsman system. Every issue of both papers has a standing column that lists the names and phone numbers of various editors, the names of the papers' ombudsmen, and the purpose of having ombudsmen. The papers also provided the address of the now extinct National News Council for readers who could not get satisfaction from the ombudsman.

Acting Editor and Publisher Paul Janensch and Acting Executive Editor Leonard Pardue have also taken several opportunities to explain the ombudsman program in columns they regularly write. The constant promotional effort through the columns and the prominant display of ombudsmen responsibilities lends credence to this study's finding that ombudsman awareness enhances the relationship between newspaper readership and perceived accountability.

The lack of a significant relationship involving the news criticism column might also be explained through the newspapers' promotional efforts or lack thereof. Although 45 percent of the respondents in this study said they read the column, it appears that respondents did not connect the column with attempts by the newspaper to be accountable. The newspapers did not promote the column as greatly as they did the ombudsman program, and no

attempt has been made to replace columnist Bob Schulman, who resigned in March 1981.

These explanations may in fact indicate that an ombudsman may work well as a public relations device with readers. This is not to suggest (as ombudsman critics have) that it is merely a public relations gimmick. It is to point out, however, as former Washington Post ombudsman Bill Green did in August 1981, that the newspaper industry has to listen to its consumers if it is to retain them.[12] An ombudsman is one way to indicate to readers that the newspaper is willing to listen to them.[13]

Limitations of the research. The limitations of the study relate to methodological considerations, although the existence of methodological problems should not detract from the major finding of the study: Those who are most aware of the ombudsman program believe the Louisville newspapers are more accountable than those with less awareness.

(1) The response rate of 45 percent is considered low for an interview schedule administered by telephone, presenting the possibility that the findings are subject to error on a systematic, rather than random, basis. A comparison of the demographic characteristics of the sample with those of the population, however, showed similarities.

(2) For time and financial reasons neither the focus groups nor the factor analysis data collection were conducted in Louisville. Ideally, participants in these two segments of the study would come from the market where the main study was conducted.

(3) The readers should be careful not to generalize the data reported here for other newspapers that have ombudsmen.

Although the methodological shortcomings do not detract from the major findings of the study, they do suggest possibilities for future research of newspaper accountability programs. This study was apparently the first attempt to discover the influences and effects ombudsman programs and other evaluation techniques have on newspaper audiences. As a result, fine-tuning the scale development process is not only necessary in subsequent studies, but encouraged. Additionally, future research might consider a different concept from "accountability" in the development of measurement instruments. Because factor analysis revealed a "fairness" dimension in this study, future researchers should consider dealing with the conceptual issue of fairness rather than accountability.

Future research might also incorporate other methods by newspapers to be accountable to their various audiences. These would include columns written by editors about the newspaper's activities and accuracy letters sent to sources, in addition to other ombudsman programs. Future research could also include comparisons between newspapers whose ombudsmen write columns and newspapers where they do not.

NOTES

[1] Eugene Patterson quoted in David Shaw, "Ethics in Journalism," St. Petersburg Times, October 4, 1981, p. 3-D.

[2] The Commission on Freedom of the Press, A Free and Responsible Press (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1947), p. 80.

[3] Ibid., p. 65.

[4] A.H. Raskin, "What's Wrong With American Newspapers?" The New York Times Magazine, June 11, 1967, p. 28.

[5] William L. Barnett, "Survey Shows Few Papers Are Using Ombudsmen," Journalism Quarterly 50 (Spring 1973): 153-156.

[6] Keith P. Sanders, "What Are Newspapers Doing To Be Responsive to Readers' Criticisms? A Survey of U.S. Daily Newspaper Accountability Systems," News Research for Better Newspapers 7 (July 1975): 148-168.

[7] Suraj Kapoor and Ralph Smith, "The Newspaper Ombudsman--A Progress Report," Journalism Quarterly 56 (Autumn 1979): 628-631.

[8] David R. Nelsen and Kenneth Starck, "The Newspaper Ombudsman as Viewed by the Rest of the Staff," Journalism Quarterly 51 (Autumn 1974): 453-457.

[9] Bradford J. Bollinger, "The Effects of the United States and Canadian Newspaper Ombudsman on Reportorial Accuracy and a Survey of the Ombudsman's Roles and Duties," unpublished master's thesis, California State University, Chico, 1983.

[10] In addition to the systematic random selection of numbers, a "plus-one" process was employed in an attempt to ensure that unpublished telephone numbers were included in the sample. That

is, a telephone number was selected from the Louisville directory, then the last digit of the number was increased by one. Three callbacks were attempted 24 hours apart before a given number was dropped from the sample.

[11] The focus group began with a brief, general description of the research, what was to be achieved, and the procedure through which it would be achieved. The hour-long session began with broad, general questions, eventually narrowed to specific areas mentioned by the panel members, and finally focused on panel members' attitudes toward specific components of the accountabiliity program at the Louisville newspapers.

[12] Association for Education in Journalism, "Proceedings of Elected Standing Committee on Professional Freedom and Responsibility," East Lansing, Mich., August 11, 1981.

[13] In the eyes of some, however, the listening should be done by editors, not ombudsmen. Detroit Free Press Publisher David Lawrence Jr. said to give the responsibility of "reader contact to ombudsmen is to insulate editors . . . ." (David Lawrence Jr., "Points On Credibility: Newspapers, It's Your Serve," Washington Journalism Review, February 1985, p. 51.)

It is a valid point, but one that does not diminish the thrust of this study: Regardless of the form of accountability, reader awareness that the newspaper is trying to be responsive will enhance reader perceptions of accountability and credibility.

Table 1

Factor Loadings With Varimax Rotation

Item	Fairness Factor
Newspapers ignore controversial issues.	.56
Newspapers will not take a stand on some issues because of fear of offending some people.	.49
Newspapers do not give all sides of a story.	.47
I don't believe many stories in the newspaper.	.48
Newspapers do not provide in-depth coverage on important issues.	.44
Newspapers are influenced by special-interest groups.	.55
Newspapers are influenced by advertisers.	.47
I am skeptical of newspapers in monopoly positions.	.52
Newspapers print only what they want to print.	.55
ALPHA RELIABILITY ESTIMATE	.77

Table 2

Awareness of Ombudsman Program

	n	PCT.
Aware, can describe	90	22.9
Aware, cannot describe	66	16.8
Not aware	219	55.7
Don't know	12	3.1
Missing data	6	1.5
TOTAL	393	100.0

Table 3

Readership of News Criticism Column

	n	PCT.
Twice a week	89	22.6
Once a week	47	12.0
Once a month	43	10.9
Never	47	12.0
Don't know	9	2.3
Missing data *	158	40.2
TOTAL	393	100.0

*The news criticism column normally appeared in The Louisville Times, so respondents who said they did not read the Times were not asked the column readership question. This accounts for the missing data.

Table 4

Column Readership Verification

	n	PCT.
Can name both	25	13.2
Can name the columnist	44	23.3
Can name the column	3	1.6
Can name neither	117	61.9
TOTAL	189	100.0

NOTE: Total does not include respondents who said they did not read either The Louisville Times or the column.

Table 5

Differences in Perceptions of Accountability Among Four Levels of News Criticism Column Readership

Group Means (Standard Deviations)

Group One	Group Two	Group Three	Group Four	F	P
27.767 (5.434)	27.205 (4.645)	27.400 (5.558)	30.389 (3.958)	1.99	n.s.

NOTE: Group One=never read or reads once a month.
Group Two=reads once or twice a week but can name neither the column nor the columnist.
Group Three=reads once or twice a week and can name either the column or the columnist.
Group Four=reads once or twice a week and can name both the column and the columnist.

Table 6

Differences in Perception of Accountability Among Three Levels of Awareness of the Ombudsman Program

Group Means (Standard Deviations)

Aware Can Describe	Aware Cannot Describe	Not Aware	F	P
29.3778 (5.4496)	26.3333 (4.9438)	26.3151 (5.1586)	11.862	.001

Table 7

Correlation Matrix of Four Variables for Total Sample

	Courier-Journal Reading	Louisville Times Reading	Ombudsman Awareness	Fairness Factor
Courier-Journal Reading	1.00	-.02	.26	.14
Louisville Times Reading		1.00	.24	.15
Ombudsman Awareness			1.00	.22
Fairness Factor				1.00

$r \geq .13$ is significant at the .05 level